

NEWS FROM REP. BILL HELLER



REP. BILL HELLER
Florida House of Representatives
District 52



Rep. Bill Heller
535 Central Avenue
St. Petersburg, FL 33701

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CONSTITUENTS & FRIENDS:

Representing you in Tallahassee as a member of the Florida House of Representatives is both a privilege and a challenge that I value very much. I appreciate your frequent input during the session regarding the many issues facing our great state, and I truly enjoy serving House District 52.

As you know, the nation is slowly recovering from an economic recession, which has hit Florida even harder than most. My colleagues and I devoted the majority of our attention to economic development and job creation while attempting to sustain existing programs that serve you and other Floridians. The areas of health, education, energy, transportation, and many others are of primary concern to everyone, and we did our best to attend to those needs too.

In this newsletter, I've detailed a few of the highlights (and lowlights) from various issue areas, and I hope you will find it informative and helpful. Should you have questions about anything in this newsletter or other issues I didn't have space to cover, write me an e-mail at bill.heller@myfloridahouse.gov, call my office at (727) 552-2573, or come by to see me at 535 Central Avenue in St. Petersburg. Your interests and concerns are very important to me and I will always do my best to discuss them with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature of Bill Heller in black ink.

State Representative Bill Heller
Florida House District 52



CENSUS 2010: The Florida House of Representatives Launches www.myfloridacensus.gov



EVERY TEN YEARS, Florida gets one chance to take a picture of your community. Based on this, the federal government allocates more than \$400 billion to state, local and tribal governments based on census data each year. Every additional Floridian counted is worth approximately \$1,500 per year in additional federal funding. By visiting www.myfloridacensus.gov, you can help make sure that everyone in your community is represented in Florida's portrait.

■ STATE BUDGET

The \$70.4 billion state budget was approved on the final day of the 2010 session. While it includes funding for many important local and statewide projects, in my opinion, the budget fails to meet the needs of Floridians. Therefore, I voted against the spending plan, and I urged Governor Charlie Crist to veto some portions of the financial package.

It was a huge challenge this year to write a budget. The Legislature began the session facing a \$3 billion shortfall. Without \$2.3 billion in federal stimulus money approved last year along with another \$270 million in assistance that Congress is expected to approve, we could not have balanced the budget without even larger cuts to services and education.

Unfortunately, the budget was also balanced by transferring \$160 million from the state's transportation trust fund to other spending. I strongly opposed that decision because the loss of revenue to transportation will mean the loss of thousands of jobs throughout Florida. Jobs are a priority for me, and this transfer is unjustifiable. Fortunately, Governor Crist vetoed this provision.

The budget also makes cuts to a highly successful program that helps new mothers considered at risk for abusing or neglecting their children. A \$10 million cut to the Healthy Families program amounts to more than a third of its budget. Roughly 3,500 of more than 8,700 families are expected to be dropped from the program.

Healthy Start coalitions, which serve at-risk pregnant women and infants, will see a cut of \$2.6 million. Additionally, contributions to county health departments are cut by \$10.5 million.

In my opinion, the budget fails to hold education harmless. While it increases the annual per-student funding by \$1.22, school officials say their costs, including insurance, retirement and utilities will outstrip that increase. In terms of overall school funding, this budget presents the second-worst per-student funding effort since 2006.



■ EDUCATION

This session, the Legislature passed several bills I believe were bad for our schools. I feel SB 6 was a poorly crafted bill written without the input of teachers, parents, and students. While I believe reform is needed, all the stakeholders must be involved from the onset. Fortunately, for Florida, Governor Crist vetoed this legislation. In my four years as a Legislator, no single piece of legislation has generated such an adverse reaction—with thousands of emails, calls and letters received, running 99 to 1 against the bill.

The Legislature also passed a bill that requires voters to once again consider the educational value of a small class size. It places a constitutional amendment on the November ballot that, if passed by the voters, would reduce the requirements of the class-size amendment. As a former teacher and education expert, I know the value of small classes, and in my opinion, much of Florida's recent education gains directly resulted from the smaller class size the voters of Florida enacted in 2002. I don't believe the proposed amendment is about what is best for Florida's students; I believe it is mainly about money. And any money saved on class size will be lost by increases in dropouts and the need for new prison beds. I strongly opposed this bill.

On the other hand, I was pleased to work on and support SB 4, a bipartisan bill that phases out the high school Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in math, science and writing, and introduces end-of-course exams in Algebra 1, Geometry and Biology 1.

■ ENERGY

As your legislator, I have constantly supported policies to promote the development of renewable energy resources and the jobs that will be created in that growing economic sector.

Given Florida's budgetary crisis, the Legislature had to be prudent and resourceful, which is why I backed a bipartisan effort to make clean energy technology accessible to homeowners and businesses. Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) financing provides local governments the flexibility to create programs to lend funds that homeowners or businesses can use to pay for improvements such as solar panels, high-efficiency water heaters, and storm hardening for their homes. The loans can be repaid over time and can also be repaid as part of a participating homeowner's property tax bill.

■ HEALTH

Health care for Floridians continues to be a major priority for me. Though we were able to provide funding for many basic health services during a tough budget year, I am disturbed by the cuts in programs for our most vulnerable residents, seniors and persons with developmental disabilities.

I was pleased that legislation was approved to crack down on the corrupt "pill mills" operating around the state. Criminal and financial penalties were added to the law to give law enforcement and prosecutors needed tools to crack down on this growing problem.

The Legislature also held a series of discussions regarding a major overhaul of Medicaid. The concept was widely criticized by doctors, hospitals and advocates. Fortunately, the Senate did not take up the legislation and it died.

■ GOOD GOVERNMENT & ELECTIONS

The people's trust is violated too often through abuse and corruption by elected officials and other public servants, and we need tougher ethics and anti-corruption laws to prevent and punish this conduct. During the 2010 session, the Legislature considered several important measures to combat public corruption, including a bill to allow for the prosecution of public servants – elected and appointed – who purposefully fail to disclose a financial interest or a future financial benefit and legislation I sponsored to strengthen and increase enforcement of state ethics laws. While there is no magic bullet that guarantees government is honest and accountable and more should have been done this year, a few steps were taken during the 2010 session to expand the arsenal available to the front line prosecutors and investigators fighting those who breach the public's trust.

I also believe improvements are needed to ensure that state laws and budgets are written in a democratic manner consistent with Florida's government-in-the-sunshine tradition. I am disappointed that a bill did not pass placing a constitutional amendment on the ballot to require budget documents to be user friendly and easier to understand. A proposed constitutional amendment, which I supported, sought to prevent last-minute backroom budget and legislative deals that avoid public input and scrutiny, not to mention substantial involvement of the full Legislature.

■ SUICIDE PREVENTION EDUCATION

In Florida, suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth ages 15-24. I sponsored legislation that will add suicide prevention education to the current options school districts can offer teachers earning their in-service hours. This will be accomplished at no cost as there are numerous free, online trainings that teachers and administrators can utilize. The legislature's passage of this bill will help our teachers identify at-risk students and prevent future tragedies.



■ ECONOMIC GROWTH

I was proud this session to support new policies to promote the recovery of our state's economy. For me, job creation for Floridians was my number one job.

To this end, I supported legislation to keep Floridians working, prevent layoffs, and bring a measure of economic stability. In an effort to hold down a dramatic increase in unemployment tax rates for businesses for the next two years, the Legislature passed on the very first day of the session a bill to reduce increases for employers.

The Legislature also passed a \$200 million 3-year jobs package designed to make Florida more economically competitive and to encourage companies to invest in our state and hire Floridians.

Throughout the session, I supported various efforts that help Florida consumers, including a reinstatement of Florida's back-to-school sales tax holiday that benefits Florida's families.

